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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER SNAR PM
SUBJECT: GOP AUTHORIZES "GRAY HULLS" ACCESS TO PANAMA'S TTW

REF: A. A: PANAMA 00933/08
¶B. B: PANAMA 00332

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (S//NF) Panamanian President Martin Torrijos has agreed to allow U.S. Navy assets to patrol Panama's territorial waters on counter-narcotics missions. Torrijos asked the Ambassador April 15 for Embassy assistance organizing a DEA-funded "Operation Together" (Operacion Conjuntos) featuring U.S. Navy vessels and National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN) vessels operating off the Pacific coast S/E of the Darien village of Jaque beginning some time after the May 3 elections until the end of Torrijos' administration on June 130. Torrijos told the Ambassador that he wanted to conduct an operation before the end of his administration, in part to underscore the close cooperation with the U.S. he sees as one of the major achievements of his administration, and in part to create a precedent that will allow the operations to continue under the incoming administration without a major decision having to be taken. We welcome his decision on both counts. The immediate aim of the mission would be to close the coastal drug trafficking corridor near the Colombian border, a point where the FARC's 57th Front is active. This would simultaneously reduce the flow of drugs to Mexico and the U.S., while putting financial pressure on the FARC 57th elements in Panama engaged in drug trafficking. The latter would support moves by the GOP to reduce the FARC's operating space in the Darien, and encourage the growing demobilization trend among 57th Front members in Panama (septel).

Torrijos Authorizes Gray Hulls

¶2. (S//NF) President Torrijos told the Ambassador April 15 that he was prepared to allow U.S. Navy (gray hull) frigates with Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs) embarked aboard, to enter Panama's territorial waters (TTW) to engage in counter-narcotics patrols under the terms of the Salas-Becker Agreement (SBA). Under the terms of SBA, only USCG cutters (white hulls) are allowed to enter Panama's TTW to perform counter-narcotics patrols, but the agreement contains a clause, Article 20, which allows U.S. Navy assets to be used in the same role if the GOP so requests. Up to now the GOP

has always declined to make that request, arguing that sensitivities among some Panamanians towards operating with the U.S. military would make such a move controversial (see REFTEL A). Torrijos told the Ambassador that he would instruct the Minister of Government and Justice, Dilio Arcia, to write a letter to the Embassy formally requesting the assistance. The stated reason would be to help Panama's National Aero-Naval Service (SENAV) "develop the capacity to protect Panama's territorial waters and to prepare for PANAMAX ALPHA." (Note: PANAMAX ALPHA is a GOP interagency crisis coordinating exercises carried out at the same time as the PANAMAX exercise. End Note)

Taking on the FARC

¶13. (S//NF) Torrijos told the Ambassador that he was taking this decision because he wants to cut off FARC 57th Front ring-leader Luis Fernando Mora's (AKA Silver) access to profits from drug trafficking on the Darien's Pacific Coast. Torrijos believes, as do we, that the 57th Front is under pressure from desertions and bad morale. He wants to capitalize on this opening to weaken the 59th Front, with the goal of ridding the Darien of FARC elements.

Importance of Gray Hulls

¶14. (S//NF)) The Joint Inter-Agency Task Force - South's (JIATF-S) ability to use U.S. Navy assets in Panama's TTW remains key to its ability to patrol Panama's coastal waters due to a shortage of USCG cutters. The Navy ships patrol under JIATF-S's command with embarked USCG Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs). When USCG cutters patrol Panama's TTW, they usually do so with Panamanian SENAN officers on board as "ship riders." Under the Salas-Becker Agreement, these officers are nominally in control of the ship while in Panamanian TTW, though they in fact usually just observe. Torrijos specifically agreed to the idea that the U.S. Navy ships have LEDETs and "ship riders" on board when patrolling Panama's TTW. This will be the first time the GOP has authorized SENAN officers to act as "ship riders" on U.S. Navy assets.

Comment

¶15. (S//NF) Torrijos' decision is another clear indication that the GOP is serious about taking steps to weaken the FARC presence in Panama. As with the recent hand-over of three FARC members to the U.S. under charges of "providing material support to a terrorist organization," (see REFTEL B), this agreement is the product of the Ambassador's ongoing discussions with VP/FM Samuel Lewis and President Torrijos on improving the security situation in the Darien. These changes in policy, and more that will be reported septel, are the result of the trust the GOP has that the USG is a good faith partner in Panama's struggle to improve the security situation in the Darien without violating Panamanian sovereignty or ignoring its stated policies. Post believes that Torrijos' decisions are laying the basis for continued enhanced cooperation with the next government, and that together with Post's "whole of government" approach to improving governance in the Darien, can make a real difference in the security situation by denying the FARC and DTOs safehaven in the Darien. Bringing the "gray hulls" in before the end of the Torrijos administration is particularly important, to avoid forcing an early and potentially divisive discussion over this issue in the incoming administration. We intend to present the presence of U.S. Navy gray hulls in Panamanian TTW to the new government as established practice.

¶16. (S//NF) Additionally, by overcoming a major Panamanian taboo over allowing U.S. military ships patrol Panama's waters, Torrijos is giving the USG a valuable new tool that

could lead to the disruption of the Central American coastal drug trafficking route, the most important drug trafficking route today. With the added assets that the "gray hulls" will give JIATF-S, we have a real chance to ease pressure on Mexico and the other Central American countries that are suffering under the secondary effects of the coastal route. Coastal drug trafficking is increasing the presence of organized crime in Panama and throughout Central America because it requires the establishment of support networks throughout the region. Post will work with JIATF-S and DEA to pressure the cartels to abandon a drug trafficking route that is putting in jeopardy the stability of several Central American countries.

STEPHENSON